

Sermon for Sunday, December 19, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"GUESS WHO'S LOOKING FOR A ROOM!"

St. Luke 2:1-18

Texts:

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me."

Revelation 3:20

"And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

St. Luke 2:7

D Ceasar Augustus ruled the world. So, when he needed funds to run his vast empire, he levied a tax. The shock waves of that tax reverberated all across his domain, even setting up repercussions in that distant little rural land of Judah. In the little town of Nazareth a carpenter set out for Bethlehem to register for the tax. It was his ancestral home and that was what the law required. He was also required to take his family with him and surely he started out with a great deal of trepidation. After all, his wife was far advanced in her pregnancy and the rough journey--the constant jarring of the donkey ride--would surely do her little good.

Just as he had feared, by the time they arrived at Bethlehem her labor pains had already started. He was desperate to find a place for his wife in her time of need. Yet, as he entered the little town of Bethlehem, the streets were already crowded. From across Judah people whose ancestry was here had come to register for the tax. He did not even stop as they passed the hotel. The Greek word used to describe it was the word pandocheion. It meant a place to stay that offered a host well-accommodated rooms, and where one could buy a prepared meal. It was the ancient world's equivalent of our modern Holiday Inns. Instead, he hurried past the pandocheion to a much more humble part of town. Actually, the place where he stopped was a sort of corral--an enclosure with small lean-to's built off of it. Here the poor could drive their animals into the enclosure and rent one of the little openings in which to take refuge. The Greek name for this place was called a kataluma. There were no provisions to be had, no furnished rooms, no gracious host to take care of a guest's needs. But at least there would be shelter, privacy, and protection from the elements. Imagine his dismay when he discovered that the kataluma was already filled. When the Bible says that there was no room in the inn, it is the word kataluma that is used. There was no place for them at all, not even in the humblest of accommodations. The man, Joseph, in his desperation placed his wife in a stable. Perhaps he had time to spread some fresh hay on the floor before he ministered to her needs. When the baby was born, they placed him on fresh straw in the trough where the animals fed--that was to protect him from the dirt and filth and from the hooves of the animals. No, there was not even a place for them in the humble kataluma.

Once in Royal David's city,
Stood a lowly cattle-shed,
Where a mother laid her Baby
In a manger for His bed.

Mary was that mother mild,
Jesus Christ her little Child.
He came down to earth from heaven
Who is God and Lord of all,
And his shelter was a stable,
And His cradle was a stall.

With the poor and mean and lowly
Lived on earth our Saviour Holy.

(C. F. Alexander)

Maybe that was to be prophetic of his life. There would never be much of a place for him. At the end no one wanted him, no one had a place for him, and the Bible says, "And when they were come to the place, which is called Calvary, there they crucified him." It had begun in Bethlehem where there had been no room for them in the kataluma, and out there on Calvary, alone and rejected, it came to an end. As a poet has put it, "Do you stop to wonder Why men never see How very closely Bethlehem Approaches Calvary?" (Eleanor Slater)

Why do you think it was so that men had no room for Jesus? Why was it he was so often rejected, so often turned away, so frequently persecuted? Perhaps we can find a clue back there at the beginning in Bethlehem when there was no place for him, not even in the inn.

The first clue we have is the fact that there was no room for him in the inn because it meant responsibility. When the inn-keeper looked at the couple before him it must have been very obvious what was happening. Joseph with anxiety written on his face, Mary doubled over with the pain--yes, it was so obvious. And the inn keeper didn't want the responsibility. A baby being born was more than he wanted to take on. So he shut the door in their faces.

Is it not still true today? To let Jesus into our lives brings with it profound responsibility. Life will never be the same if we let him in. For example, if I let him into my life it means that whatever happens to my neighbor now becomes my concern too. No longer can I ignore him and pass by on the other side. In Samaritan-like compassion I am now involved in a responsibility for him and what happens to him. Or again, what about the things I have and own? If I let Jesus in, doesn't that give me new responsibilities with what I have? Look what happened to Zacchaeus! When he made room in his life for Jesus he ended up giving half of all he had to the poor.

Is that the sort of responsibility we are looking for? If we let him in life can never be lived on the same level again. So, the inn keeper didn't let Jesus in that night because he didn't want the responsibility. And maybe that is a clue as to why some of us don't want to let him in either.

The second clue we find for why there was no room for Jesus is because the inn was already full. Those whose ancestral roots were in Bethlehem had come from all over Judah to register for the census. The town was terribly overcrowded and the meager facilities of the little village were taxed beyond capacity. There was no room for them because the inn was already full.

Isn't this true in our lives? We are already too busy. We are always looking for shortcuts. We've got the Polaroid camera, Reader's Digest condensed books, instant coffee, dehydrated soups, condensed milk and concentrated orange juices. We look for anything to save a minute and that's because we are so busy. We don't always know where we are going, but we are in an awful hurry to get there. We are like the airline pilot who told his passengers that he had some good news and some bad news. The bad news was that they were lost because the compass was broken. The good news was they had a tail wind and were making very good time.

Isn't that true in your life? Our time is often so filled with the things we are doing that we can hardly get everything done. Yet, so often we have no sense of purpose and often wonder if we are using life to accomplish anything worthwhile. I read an article recently about the modern housewife. In spite of all the labor-saving devices she has, she works more hours and has far more responsibilities than her grandmother ever dreamed of. Someone recently gave me a book that was written back in the 1930s for ministers. It was a book about the things a pastor should

do as the minister of a local church. I was absolutely amazed! Many of the duties of the pastor for those days we are supposed to do today with our left hand in our spare time and much of what a pastor does today were not even in the book. And that's true in all our lives. It isn't that we are irreligious or antagonistic towards Jesus, we are simply so busy, life is so full, that there is just little place for Jesus.

So, there was no room for Jesus in Bethlehem because the inn was already full. Whom would the inn keeper evict in order to make room for Jesus? And how about you? Who would you evict--what would you take out of your life to make room for Jesus? Are you willing to give up anything, willing to reorganize your life, to make room for Jesus? You see, most of us would need to reorganize life, change our priorities, our life style, to make room for Jesus. That's the question Christmas forces on us.

A third clue as to why there was no room for Jesus is in the fact that the inn keeper didn't recognize the importance of those people standing at his door that night. For centuries the Jews had waited for Messiah. With anxious longing they had hoped for his coming. Do you think that inn keeper would have turned them away that night if he had realized that before him stood the fulfillment of the dreams of his people? Do you think he would have turned them away if he had known God's moment had come? But there was no room for them--no room because the keeper of the inn did not know the importance of the desperate people standing before his door.

How desperately the world today needs help. Terrible problems face mankind today. In this century we have seen men come to power who claimed to have the answer. We have seen philosophies of life claim great areas of the world, claiming to have the solution to our problems. But, so far, none of them have worked very well. And the tragedy is this--that the saviour of the world stands at the door of human existence, ready to help us, ready to heal the hurts and wounds that cut to the quick of life, ready to give meaning and purpose and direction to life, ready to forgive and heal the tragedy of human sin, and we do not recognize him, we do not know who he is or what He wants to do for us.

So many today do not recognize Jesus for who and what he really is. We turn him away, close the door in his face, not knowing that we have shut out the Savior of the world. If men really knew who he is, what he can do for us, do you think we would turn him away? But so many are indifferent to Jesus because they do not recognize his importance.

Studdart-Kennedy, a poet-preacher of England, has written a poem entitled "Indifference" in which he imagines Jesus coming to modern Birmingham, England.

He writes: When Jesus came to Birmingham, they simply passed Him by,
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give him pain
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.
Still Jesus cried, "Forgive them, for they know not what they do."
And still it rained the winter rain that drenched him through and through.

If you knew that Jesus could change your life, could save you, could give meaning and purpose to you, could give you peace and forgiveness, would you turn him away? No, we do not recognize truly his importance. As the old spiritual puts it, "we didn't know who you wuz..."

The final clue to why there was no room in the inn is in the fact that Jesus never forces himself on anyone. If Caesar Augustus had arrived in Bethlehem that night needing a room, his soldiers would have cleared the finest place in town to make

room for him. Had Herod come to town that night he would have ordered--and gotten--the best Bethlehem had to offer. But Jesus never does that--he never forces himself on anyone. When the inn keeper didn't want the responsibility, when the place was full, when he didn't recognize their importance and shut the door in their faces, Mary and Joseph turned quietly away. That's the way God is--he never forces himself upon us.

A part of our text for this morning is from the third chapter of Revelation. Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me." Yes, Jesus knocks at the door of our hearts, but he does not force himself upon us. We have to open the door, we have to make room for him, we have to invite him in.

Christmas is a time when we celebrate the coming of Jesus, the savior of the world. He comes to us when we don't want any new responsibilities, when life is already full, when we don't really believe he can change our lives. He knocks at the door of our hearts, but he never forces himself upon us--the handle to the door is on our side.

So, it is Christmas again and guess who is looking for a room. Is there room in your heart for him?